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# The Rev. Ramsdell's magical campground

In 1854, Thompson's Hezekiah Ramsdell introduced the revivalist camp meeting to northeastern Connecticut at a cramped location adjacent to the Norwich and Worcester Railroad and Quinebaug River.

Three years later, a national financial and banking collapse devastated the region's textile industry and thousands of unemployed mill workers flooded into the Rev. Ramsdell's campground, arriving on special trains from the adjacent mill villages at Thompson, Plainfield and Putnam.

However, because of the overcrowded and unsanitary conditions at Danielsonville and the lack of opportunity to expand, in 1859 Ramsdell relocated the campground to Willimantic.

In 1860, the Willimantic Methodist Campground Association was established on a hill a mile south of the industrial borough. Donated by Lyman Jordan, the 30-acre site had freshwater springs and was in close proximity to railroads.

The site expanded rapidly over the next generation and by the end of the 19th century, the Willimantic campground was renown across the nation for its famed annual meetings each August and for its delightful location and the attractive architecture of its cottages.

The camp meetings' popularity extended well into the 20th century as the official program for the 1929 annual meeting illustrates.

The program announced that Willimantic was "an ideal place to deepen, broaden and heighten spiritual life" and a place where "able preachers and artistic singers lure the masses." Moreover, boasted the program, low rates enabled whole families to stay there for the entire eight days between Aug. 17 and 25.

The 1929 meeting opened with a concert in the Tabernacle on Saturday evening, Aug. 17, conducted by the Schubert Male Quartette of Boston. All the lectures and concerts were free of charge and no registration was necessary.

Nevertheless, the organizers hoped that guests would donate generously for the ground's prop-

the grounds.

Lectures and concerts did not wholly dominate the camp meeting week. The Rev. Joseph Scott Pennepacker was in charge of recreational activities, which included hikes, tennis, baseball, volleyball, quoits and jitney golf. Furthermore, those who were staying the week but who did not have cooking facilities could purchase meals at the boarding house. Breakfast and supper cost 40 cents, dinners were 60 cents and chicken dinners cost 75 cents. There was a special weekly rate of nine dollars for 26 meals.

Visitors adhered to a program repeated each day. A "rising bell" awakened all at 6:30 every morning and breakfast commenced at 7:30 a.m.

Between 8:15 a.m. and 9 a.m. all gathered at the Tabernacle for daily praise and worship and each day, one of six young preachers gave morning devotions. From 9 a.m. until noon, Marjorie

Stephens of Boston University's School of Religious Education, held a daily kindergarten class. From 11 a.m. until noon, professor W. G. Chanter of Wesleyan University gave a daily lecture on the "Life of Jesus."

The morning programs ended at 12:15 p.m. when the dinner hour commenced. At 2 p.m. the Rev. Pennepacker, who was pastor of the Niantic Methodist Church, led a group discussion with all those under age 21 on the "Questions of Youth." On Monday and Tuesday

at 2 p.m., the Woman's Home Missionary Society and Women's Foreign Missionary Society gave talks on their experiences in spreading the word of God to immigrants in the local milltowns and to natives in far off lands. At 4 p.m., Pennepacker took charge of the recreational programs and at 5:30 p.m. was "Supper Hour."

Aug. 22 was Inter-Denominational Day, where the campground extended a special invitation to all other Christian communions to spend the day at the

camp. On Friday at 7:30 p.m., R. W. Vining of the Connecticut Temperance and Anti-Saloon League presented "a thrilling moving picture" that outlined the sins of the "demon drink."

Choir rehearsals opened the evening programs at 7 p.m. and silent meditation commenced at 7:20 p.m., followed by sermons and addresses at 7:40 until 9:30. The evening closed at 10 p.m. after 30 minutes of a program entitled "Young People's Good-Night Sing." The "retiring bell" then said "good night" to all.

The week encompassed two Sundays with "Outstanding Attractions." Known as Camp Meeting Sunday, leading figures from the northeast led the worship. The Schubert Male Quartette sang at all services on Aug. 17, and on Aug. 25, New York tenor Justin Lawrie performed at each service.

The 1938 hurricane badly damaged Willimantic's historic campground. Nevertheless, it has survived and thrived and still offers inter-denominational services each August. Although now administered by a private organization, the Beacon Trust, the campground committee welcomes visi-

tors by appointment. I have taken several tours and college field trips to this remarkable place in recent years and everyone comes away mightily impressed.



The cover of the 1929 program for the Willimantic Campground Meeting features this picture of the Tabernacle during a 1928 meeting.



Tom Beardsley

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